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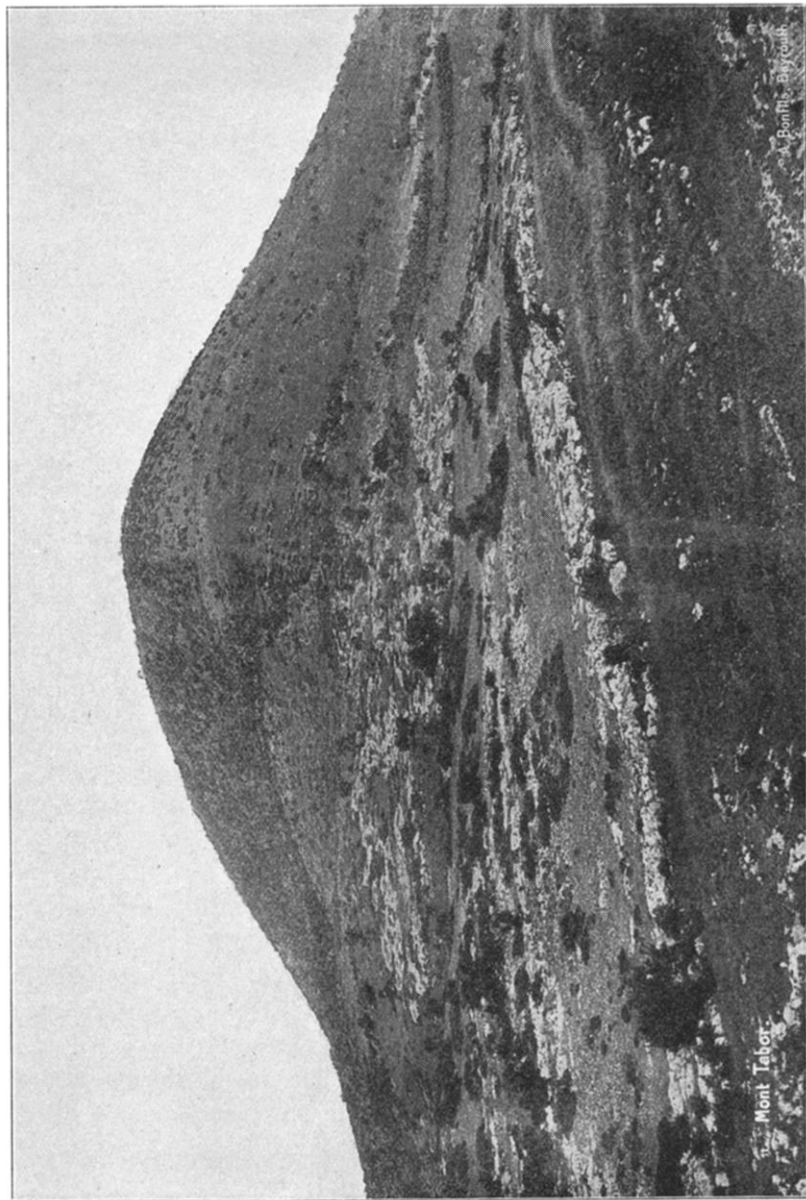
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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE JEWS BETWEEN 444 AND 160 B. C.

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1. *Influences which determined the social life of Judaism.*—The Babylonian exile and the influences which grew out of it transformed the social life as fundamentally as they did the faith of the Hebrew race. The destruction of the ancient Judean state brought the scattered remnants of the nation into intimate and continued contact with the dominant peoples of the Semitic world. A certain amount of imitation was inevitable. In many cases the foreign influences were negative rather than positive. Above all the changed conditions made necessary a fundamental reconstruction of society. The revolutionizing changes, however, did not come until the last century of the Persian period, when the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt by Nehemiah, and when, for the first time since the disaster of 586 B. C., large bodies of Jews from the dispersion came back, as did the expedition under Ezra, to swell the numbers of the poor, struggling community in Judah. Then was promulgated in



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Palestine the fully developed priestly law, which had gradually taken form in the East, and which henceforth became the guiding norm of Judaism.

Long centuries of subjection to foreign masters, severe persecutions, and a protracted, almost mortal, struggle with the insistent, seductive culture of Greece completed the transformation. The result was that, instead of the old Hebrew kingdom, with its king, nobility, middle and dependent classes, and social customs similar to those of other ancient Semitic states, there appeared the hierarchy, in which the political and social life of the community all centered about the temple.

2. *The historical sources.*—The life of Judaism is reflected in a great variety of writings. Chief among these is the priestly code (preserved in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers), which was the constitution of the hierarchy. The chronicler in his ecclesiastical history of Jerusalem (1 and 2 Chronicles) has read so many of the social conditions of his own times into his account of the earlier that his work is a valuable source for information respecting the Jewish community during the Greek period when he lived. The book of Joel and Zech., chaps. 9–14, contain many suggestive facts. Josephus has also preserved certain traditions which present vivid pictures of the life of the age; but the fullest and most entertaining portrayal of society in Palestine about 200 B. C. is from the pen of the genial son of Sirach, and is found in the collection of his proverbs, translated into Greek by his grandson and known as the book of Ecclesiasticus.

3. *The social organization of the hierarchy.*—Remnants of the old monarchical organization survived the Babylonian exile. At first the Persian government placed over the sub-province of Judah, Jews who were descendants of the royal Davidic line. At the time of the rebuilding of the temple, in 520 B. C., the political expectations of the community centered in Zerubbabel, and the hope of raising him to the position of an independent king found open expression (Hag. 2:23; Zech. 6:9–14—restored text). Although this hope was never fulfilled, and the house of David soon sank to a position of insignificance (1 Chron., chap.

3), the authority of the secular nobility continued to be recognized. Nehemiah appealed to this class to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; but side by side with heads of the leading lay families he found a priestly aristocracy, the influence of which was rapidly increasing.

The promulgation of the priestly code hastened the process which had already begun, for it stripped the secular nobility of most of the authority which it had possessed, and transferred it to the priests. Remnants of the ancient monarchical aristocracy survived during the succeeding centuries, and appear to have ultimately found partial recognition in the "Gerousia," or assembly of the elders, to which all important questions which concerned the nation were later referred; but during the two centuries following the work of Nehemiah and Ezra the supreme civil, as well as religious, authority was exercised by the priests.

While the Jews were ruled by foreign masters, and all their attention was focused on the temple, and their energies were devoted to observing the law, it was inevitable that the head of the temple service should become the ruler of the community as well. The Jerusalem priesthood showed themselves as ready to assume the temporal power as did their fellow-ecclesiastics in ancient Egypt and Phœnicia or in mediæval Rome. The Jewish high priests, like the kings of old, were anointed, wore the purple, enjoyed royal honors, and were recognized as the head of the community by its foreign masters. The only limitations to their power were the obligations which their nation owed to its conquerors, and the will of the people, which the heads of the hierarchy rarely opposed.

Naturally the immediate members of the family of the high priest shared the authority and prestige of their head, so that they became the most prominent representatives of the priestly aristocracy. Next to them were the priests, the descendants of those who had ministered at the pre-exilic Jerusalem temple. Under them was the class known as the Levites. They appear to have been the descendants of the priests who had been associated with the high places abolished at the reformation of Josiah (Ezek. 44 : 10-14). In time this class included: (1) those

who were assigned to the less attractive duties in connection with the general temple service, as, for example, the preparation of the showbread (1 Chron. 9:32); (2) the doorkeepers, and (3) the singers or temple musicians.

Among the public officials in the hierarchy the chronicler mentions still another class, the Nethinim, "the given," and the children of Solomon's servants (Ezra 2:43-58). Tradition states, and their general designations confirm the assertion, that they were descended from the slaves who had originally been presented to the temple. They stood at the bottom of the social ladder, and to them were assigned the most menial duties in connection with the temple service.

The authority of the high priests seems to have been accepted unquestioningly by the people, for it was strengthened by the religious instincts and by the intense devotion to the law which was the dominant characteristic of Judaism. Although only a few, like Simon the Just, used their influence to improve the condition of the community, the masses continued to revere the office, irrespective of the character of the man who held it. The great and imperative demands made upon the resources of the people in behalf of the priests and temple servants by the law would have been branded as grinding despotism and extortion in a civil state, but in the hierarchy they were taken as a matter of course, and the thought of complaint seems to have been entirely absent from the popular mind.

Fear the Lord and glorify his priest;
And give him his portion, even as it is commanded you:
The first fruits of the trespass offering and the gift of the shoulders,
And the sacrifice of sanctification, and the first fruits of holy things,

was the advice of such a representative and broad-minded man as the son of Sirach (Ecclus. 7:31).

4. *The aristocracy of learning.*—The same conditions which molded Judaism created, in addition to the priestly, still another type of aristocracy—that of learning. The law, before which all bowed, and which was the one acknowledged source of authority in the Jewish community, required not only priests and Levites to carry out its injunctions, but also specialists to

interpret and further expand it. Naturally the men who stood in such a close and important relation to the law as did the scribes were, like the priests, regarded with reverence by the masses. They soon attracted to their ranks the abler men in the community who did not by the accident of birth belong to the priestly nobility. In the minds of the people they soon came to occupy the position of authority, as the interpreters of Jehovah's will, which the prophets held in earlier days. Being interpreters of the law, it was inevitable that cases should be referred to the scribes for decision, so that in time they were recognized, side by side with the priests, as the authorized judges of the community.

Although the fact is not generally recognized during this age, the third great class of teachers in ancient Israel, the wise men or sages, turned scribes. The sayings of the son of Sirach, who was himself one of the last distinguished representatives of the wisdom school, reveal the gradual transformation. Describing the ideal wise man-scribe, he states that

He will seek out the hidden meaning of proverbs,
And be conversant in dark sayings of parables.
He will show forth the instruction which he has been taught;
And will glory in the law of the covenant of the Lord (39 : 3, 8).

Elsewhere he remarks :

The wisdom of the scribe comes by opportunity of leisure ;
And he who has little business shall become wise (28 : 24).

His exhortations to "glorify the priest," and to "let all your discourse be in the law of the Most High" (7 : 31 ; 9 : 15), are in striking contrast to the earlier apathetic attitude of the wise toward the ritual. He goes so far as to identify wisdom with the law :

All wisdom is the fear of the Lord ;
And in all wisdom is the doing of the law (19 : 20).

His teachings recall that of another wise man-scribe, who belongs to the same period :

Fear God and keep his commandments ;
For this is the whole *duty* of man (Eccles. 12 : 13, b).

Although originally their realm of thought and methods were so different, the fusion of the sage and scribe was easy, since

both were students of the inherited lore of the past, and both were popular teachers of the masses. Since the law was regarded by later Judaism as a complete rule for human conduct, it was but natural that the sage should in part abandon the proverbs and "parables of the ancients" for the Torah.

Standing before the people as the representatives of the earlier prophets and sages, the scribes were regarded with great veneration by the masses. They were the ones who were sought for in the council of the people, who occupied the seats of honor in the assembly, and who sat in the public tribunal (Ecclus. 38:33). In general, the exalted position of influence which was assigned to them was well deserved, for they were the faithful, untiring teachers, who in time thoroughly instructed the originally ignorant Jewish community in the details of its complex law.

5. *The position and occupations of the masses.*—Looked down upon and almost despised by the learned, who were blessed with "opportunity of leisure," were those who "maintain the fabric of the world, whose prayer is the handiwork of their craft" (Ecclus. 38:34). Condescendingly, almost pityingly, the son of Sirach speaks of those "who hold the plow, who glory in the shaft of the goad, who drive oxen and are occupied in their labors, whose heart is upon turning their furrows, and whose wakefulness is to give their heifers their fodder" (38:25, 26). In the same manner he refers to "the artificer and workmaster who pass their time by night as by day, who cut gravings of signets, who set their heart to preserve likeness in their portraiture, and who are wakeful to finish their work" (38:27). He also describes the smiths "who wrestle in the heat of their furnaces, with the clang of hammers always in their ears," and the potters "who sit at their work and turn the wheel about with their feet, who fashion the clay with their arms and apply their hearts to finish the glazing" (38:28-30). He recognizes that

Without these a city would not be inhabited,
And men would not sojourn nor walk up and down *therein*;

but for them are none of the privileges and honors enjoyed by the scribes (38:32, 33).

Physicians are found, but they have only half won the confidence of the community. The liberal son of Sirach urges that

The Lord created medicines out of the earth;
And a prudent man will have no disgust at them (38 : 4).

He recommends taking careful precautions to prevent disease, and, when it comes, first to apply home remedies; but if these are ineffective, to call in the doctors (38 : 9-12). He appears to trust as much in their prayers as in their prescriptions, and sagely remarks in conclusion :

He that sins before his Maker,
Let him fall into the hands of the physician (38 : 14, 15).

Apothecaries were also found to coöperate with the doctors in healing the ills of humanity (Ecclus. 38 : 8).

Commerce was still regarded with suspicion by the religious teachers of Israel. Business in the East, of the past as of the present, was conducted in accordance with very questionable principles :

A merchant shall hardly keep from wrong-doing;
And a huckster shall not be acquitted of sin (Eccles. 26 : 29).

6. *Social conditions*.—On the whole, the relations between the different classes within the Jewish community were normal and friendly. The priestly and learned aristocracy, instead of preying upon the masses without giving anything in return, were their servants and teachers. Religion bound all classes together and brought them into close and constant contact with each other. Devotion to the law and the acquisition of learning, not wealth, were the dominant motives in the state. At the same time it was not entirely free from those social disorders which are especially flagrant in the Orient. "Presents and gifts blinded the eyes of the wise" (20 : 29). "Poor men were a pasture for the rich" (Ecclus. 13 : 19). Judges often perverted the cause of the defenseless, and there was no court of appeal.

In public questions the will of the majority was made known through the general assembly, which was convened whenever necessity required. The high priests rarely took action in important matters without consulting this body, and do not

appear to have ever directly opposed its decisions. Thus this institution, which became very prominent in the life of Judaism, conserved the popular liberties and democratic ideas which had distinguished the ancient Hebrew state from all other oriental societies. Freedom of thought and expression was never restricted, so that the religion of Jehovah was ever open to new ideas and development.

7. *Family life*.—The law jealously guarded the purity of the home life. Monogamy was taken for granted, and no examples of polygamy are given. In the midst of almost universal corruption, the Jews were conspicuous for their social morality. The complete joy of trustful companionship, based upon equality between husband and wife, was, however, unknown. The wife, like the children and household slaves, was the absolute possession of her husband. If she did not please her lord, he had the right to divorce her at a moment's notice. The writers of the age have little to say about love between husband and wife. Marriage was regarded as a business contract, and "happy was the husband of a good wife" (Ecclus. 26: 1). "The beauty of a good wife was the ordering of her husband's house" (Ecclus. 26: 16).

The grace of a wife will delight her husband ;
And her knowledge will fatten his bones.
A silent woman is a gift of the Lord ;
And there is nothing worth so much as a well-instructed soul.
A modest woman is grace upon grace ;
And there is no price worthy of a continent soul (Ecclus. 26: 13-15).

Kept, as they were, in comparative ignorance, treated as children and regarded as personal property, it is not strange that many of them were malicious, quarrelsome, given to gossip, and sometimes addicted to drink and unchaste (Ecclus. 25: 16-26; 26: 5-12).

The suggestions, which the son of Sirach gives, of the relations between fathers and their children are not altogether ideal. It was an age when parental affection found expression chiefly in discipline. "Stripes and correction are wisdom at every season" (22: 6), was the prevailing principle in education.

An unbroken horse becomes stubborn ;
 And a son left at large becomes headstrong.
 Indulge your child, and he will make you afraid ;
 Play with him, and he will grieve you.
 Laugh not with him, lest you have sorrow with him ;
 And you gnash your teeth in the end.
 Give him no liberty in his youth,
 And beat him on his sides while he is a child,
 Lest he grow stubborn and be disobedient toward you (30 : 9-13).

The education which the Jewish boys received was well calculated to make them tyrants in turn. The slaves shared with the children the rigor of the stern home rule :

Bread, discipline, and work for a slave ;
 Yoke and thong will bow the neck ;
 And for an evil servant there are racks and torture (33 : 24, 26)

8. *Social intercourse*.—These glimpses into the family life indicate that, unless he was by nature a tyrant, the man, who was absolute master of his domestic domain, found little relaxation or pleasure in the life of his home. Debarred by false social and educational ideas from free companionship with his wife and children, he found it in the company of his equals. Men attended to the social functions, while their wives stayed at home and toiled. Beside the city gates, in the temple court, or among the bazars they gossiped, discussed politics, and arranged matrimonial alliances—in a very businesslike and unromantic fashion—for their sons and daughters.

Emulating the example of their foreign masters, they occasionally gave elaborate banquets to their friends in order to further their personal ends or pay off their social debts. The wisdom writers of the period present a detailed code of etiquette to be observed at these great social events. Some of their injunctions are worthy of repeating :

When you sit at a great table be not greedy ;
 And say not, Many are the things upon it.
 Stretch not out your hand toward whatever you see ;
 And thrust not your fingers into the dish.
 Consider your neighbor's *liking* by your own ;
 And be discreet in every point.

Eat as a man those things which are set before you ;
 And eat not greedily, lest you be disliked.
 Be first to leave off for manners' sake ;
 And be not insatiable, lest you give offense.
 Pour not out talk when there is a performance of music,
 And display not your wisdom out of season (Ecclus. 31:12, 14-17; 32:4).

As in later times, one was chosen from the assembly to be the ruler of the feast and to see that the wants of each one of the guests were anticipated (Ecclus. 32:1). Even the stern, orthodox Jews relaxed on these occasions and enjoyed themselves. In the midst of his solemn moralizing the son of Sirach pauses to remark feelingly that,

*As a signet of carbuncle in a setting of gold,
 So is a concert of music in a banquet of wine.
 As a signet of emerald in a work of gold,
 So is a strain of music with pleasant wine (35:5, 6).*

In the oft-recurring religious festivals, which under the priestly law were observed with great display and splendor, the social instincts of the community also found expression. Not only the men, but also at certain of the great feasts, like that of Tabernacles, the women and children, came up to Jerusalem, and for a week lived in booths, feasted, worshiped, visited, and undoubtedly, under the shadow of the temple, relaxed a little the severe régime of the home life. Priests, scribes, and people united as one great family, and all felt again the common bond of race and religion.

9. *The elements of strength and weakness in Jewish life.*—This general survey has revealed the elements of weakness in Judaism which the teachings and work of Jesus brought out into still stronger contrast. The civil authority given to the priests constituted a danger which they were not able to resist and still retain intact their purity of character and purpose. The veneration with which the common people regarded the scribes tended to make them in time proud and hypocritical. The home life failed to give to the husband, the wife, and the children that rest and inspiration which are absolutely necessary for the development of the noblest and broadest characters. The

habits of selfishness formed there by the men undoubtedly explain in part why the Jews are so selfish in their relations to other peoples, and why they were content to enjoy their superior religious enlightenment without endeavoring to impart it to their neighbors. Furthermore, any social organization which devotes its entire energies to a round of religious exercises is not performing its duty in the great family of nations. Jewish society lacked the spirit of altruism, and the inspiration of a noble purpose, and as a result tended to become petty, mean, and sordid.

Compared, however, with the social life of other civilized nations of that period, as, for example, the Greek, that of the Jews was conspicuous for its purity and simplicity. In an age when it was the fashion to be treacherous, and to pander to the rich and influential, the Jews maintained a comparatively high ideal of justice, honor, and personal freedom. The rights and liberties of the individual were sacredly guarded. The love and reverence for learning were marked characteristics, not only of the favored classes, but also of the masses. Honest toil in any field of activity was recognized, and not looked upon as in itself degrading, as it was among the Greeks and Romans. Although Jewish social life during these centuries was by no means perfect in every respect, it satisfied the needs of the race at the stage in its development when it was most sorely tested, first by contact with the alluring life of the Greeks, and later by the bitter persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes. To the astonishment of the world, Judaism emerged triumphant, thereby demonstrating that it possessed enduring elements of strength.